

# Measuring and Improving Washington's Public Health System

*The Proposed Standards for Public Health represent what should be in place throughout Washington's public health system.*



As part of *Public Health Improvement Plan* development, the Washington Legislature requires minimum standards for public health agencies that are based on the core functions of public health. The guiding principle of this effort is to articulate, in clear language, what every citizen has a right to expect in the way of public health protection. These standards build accountability into Washington's public health system by setting performance levels for local and state agencies. Among other purposes, the standards may be used as a basis for contracting with local health jurisdictions and for budget and planning decisions at the state and local levels.

Setting standards and performance measures for public health agencies is especially challenging because each has its own local history, method of funding, and unique array of services. To meet this challenge with a practical set of standards, local and state public health officials first developed a framework that could be used across diverse communities. This framework and an example were published in the 1998 PHIP. In the following two years, more than 150 health officials

throughout the state met to draft workable standards—four or five each—for five key aspects of public health:

- Protecting people from disease
- Understanding health issues
- Assuring a safe and healthy environment
- Promoting healthy living
- Helping people get the services they need

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Local and state public health officials performed a self-assessment field test of the proposed standards. Next, they took the standards into the field, through on-site evaluation of the standards and their measures. This process involved scheduled site visits with all 34 local health jurisdictions and 20 DOH programs. The information gathered is being used to identify needed supports, resources, and training, and to provide a context for implementing a statewide performance measurement system.

The work has also produced a compilation of “best practices” that will jump-start quality improvement in both local jurisdictions and state programs.

Local-state collaboration has been a key principle in this effort. The standards were written to illustrate that there are both state and local responsibilities that must be met to keep the public health system performing effectively to protect the citizens of Washington State.

Both the on-site evaluation of the standards and the performance standards themselves follow a quality improvement process that emphasizes decision-making based on data, science, best practices, documentation of practice, evaluation of practice, and collaboration and partnerships.

The review process confirmed that the proposed standards:

- Set a reasonable expectation of performance, though all local and state public health agencies must stretch to meet them in most areas
- Are measurable
- Allow differences in performance among agencies to be identified and quantified

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The table on the next page shows how local public health agencies and 20 state programs would be able to meet the proposed standards if they were in place today.

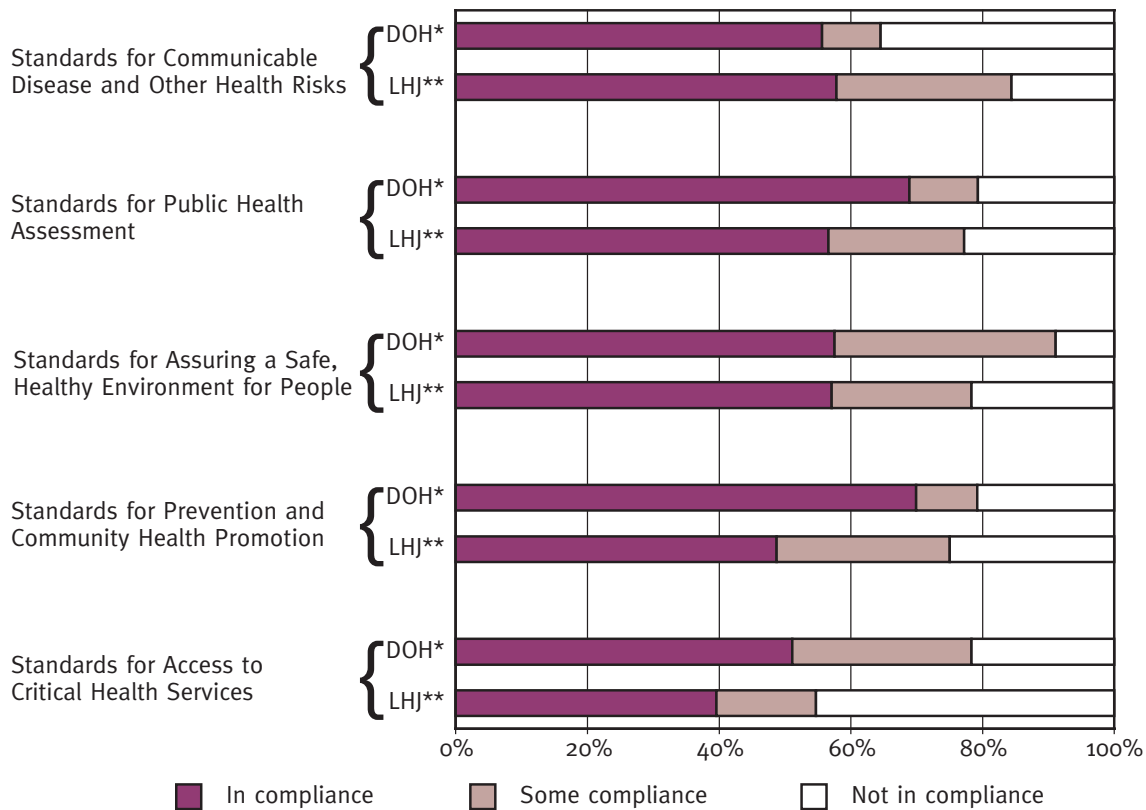
The review process was a test of the standards and measures, not an actual baseline measure. But the process provided excellent information about our public health system and will help us address many issues in the future. For example, on-site reviews revealed that:

- State and local public health agencies have substantial resource needs for more and flexible funding, staff with specific skills in areas such as assessment and quality improvement, more time for planning and resource development, more training opportunities, and access to standardized and integrated data bases and information systems.
- Many state and local public health agencies rely on institutional memory about staff roles—who to contact and how to complete tasks. Some communication processes at both the local and state levels are based on staff being “locally known.” This situation causes problems in the event of staff changes and makes orientation of new staff more difficult.
- Funding drives the ability to conduct specific programs. Agencies with larger budgets and staff are more able to comply with the standards, particularly in the area of assessment. Small agencies may be particularly stressed in meeting the standards.
- The system works as well as it does because of the skills and dedication of public health staff and their commitment to health improvement.

The list of proposed standards appears in Appendix 4.

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### Where We Are Today in Meeting Washington's Proposed Standards for Public Health



\*Percent of selected DOH program sites

\*\*Percent of LHJs

This chart shows the extent to which local public health agencies and a selected group of 20 DOH programs would be able to meet Washington's Proposed Standards for Public Health if the standards were in place today.

The chart shows findings from the field test of the standards—the first organized opportunity to apply the standards and observe current performance. While the terms “compliance,” “not in compliance,” and “some compliance” are used, it is important to remember that the evaluation process was focused on testing the standards themselves, not the sites. The site visits documented degrees of compliance as if the standards were an agreed-upon set of expectations that the public health agencies and programs had been working within for some time.

## Next Steps

### For Measuring and Improving Washington's Public Health System

1. Adopt the Proposed Standards for Public Health with minor modifications, based on field tests and independent measurement.
2. Implement an ongoing process for using the Proposed Standards for Public Health to measure public health performance:
  - Create a biennial site-review process and complete site visits within a fixed time.
  - Establish a baseline measurement before linking findings to financing decisions.
  - Publish system-wide and site-specific reports; use findings in budgeting and future PHIPs.
3. Link Proposed Standards for Public Health to funding allocations and contracts. Support achieving compliance with the standards by addressing:
  - Alternative ways to organize and deliver some services
  - Monitoring and reporting processes for state and local departments
  - Workforce development and training needs
  - Integration of quality improvement planning throughout the system.
4. Disseminate best practices materials, post and maintain them on a website, and routinely update these following future site reviews.